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BAILEY'S "FESTUS"

In 1839 was published at Bristol, England, a poem called 'Festus,' by Philip James Bailey, barrister-at-law. Its reception was so favorable that Hudson felt called on to refer to its success as a reversal of the true order of things, as an evidence that "we of to-day build our pyramids base uppermost," and as an indication of the decay of true critical power. Among those who praised the poem were some noted men. Tennyson is said to have written, "I scarcely trust myself to say how much I admire it, for fear of falling into extravagance." Not less favorable was the opinion of Lord Lytton: "A most remarkable poem of great beauty and of greater promise. My admiration for it is deep and sincere." But these praises are mild compared with some of the others that were bestowed on the work. One American critic ranked it with the "Iliad," "Macbeth," and "Paradise Lost." "It has enough to set up fifty poets;" still another said, "There is matter enough in it to float a hundred volumes of the usual prosy poetry."

Most of the reviews were written soon after the appearance of the poem, but soon gift copies ceased to circulate, and some half a dozen lines are all that have won for themselves an abiding place in English thought. Though there are but few nuggets of pure thought in the poem, it will not be altogether without gain to examine the dross from which they came. The positive reward may not be great, but we may at least learn something from the author's failure in his method of placing his ore on the public market. It can be considered a misfortune that Bailey was ambitious to write a long poem, and he lost his chance of being considered a great artist by refusing to follow the example of Gray and reduce all that he had to say to the narrowest compass. Whipple says, "In 'Festus' there is a lust after power, there is a hungering and thirsting after unrighteousness, a glow of the imagination unhallowed save by its own energies. There is a disregard of all the moral, religious and artistic associations of others. The work partakes half of Parnassus, half of Bedlam." The opinion of Hudson is about the same, "It is neither

good science nor good poetry. The author mistakes darkness for depth, rudeness for strength. The poem has no vitality, no organization. Its parts are like beads on a string, and we remember the parts because there is no whole." Comparing these words with the opinions quoted at the beginning, we may conclude that the statement of a writer in *Blackwood's* is somewhat nearer the truth than any of those given: "There is genuine poetic power, and an utter disregard of the demands of art. It is chaos come again; but chaos with lightning flashes of genius. Those who are in search of the beauties, and those who are in search of the monstrosities of literature may apply themselves with success to '*Festus*.' We wish that we could say that the former would be likely to reap the more abundant harvest!"

Whipple calls the poem the last result of the Satanic school of poetry, for like the "*Faust*" and "*Paradise Lost*," it deals with an external spiritual power working for the moral ruin of man. This devil, Lucifer, by name, is in some respects the weakness of all that family of literary devils extending from Marlowe's to Byron's. Fain would we say some good things of Lucifer, as Masson has said of Satan and Mephistopheles in "*The Three Devils*," but this one is little more than an imitation of Mephistopheles, "the quintessence of skepticism."

Like him, Lucifer appears in heaven and demands that there be given to him one of the youths among the children of men. This request is granted, and with the knowledge that he must fail he goes forth to tempt Festus who could not enjoy anything which had not the "honied sting of sin." And it was his wish that he might have

. . . . an endless dream
Of love and beauty 'mid the stars.

Through this comes the temptation, though the means used by Lucifer do not appear especially devilish, in making the love of Festus the instrument of his ruin, although Hudson says that love is the only idea he has and that is only half an idea. Long harangues follow each other so quickly that we feel that Festus loves wisely but altogether too long. A half also is given to Lucifer for he, too, is represented as falling in love and showing all the pangs of jealousy when he returns from another

world and finds that she whom once he loved is devoted to Festus. In this, Lucifer is an unique member of his family, and few imaginations will be strong enough to conceive of a Lucifer singing love ditties at the feet of his lady-love. The finale is even more remarkable, for when Festus is received into glory, there is heard the command of the Almighty:

Take, Lucifer, thy place. This day art thou
Redeemed to archangelic state;

and then he sees the legions of the lost

Transformed already by the bare behest
Of God, our maker, to the purest form
Of seraph brightness.

Such is a brief outline of the representation of some of the abstract thoughts embodied in human form, for apart from the theological questions discussed, the poem presents the thoughts of an unreal humanity dealing with itself and the worlds about it. The conversations are not all of this world but such as might be used by beings who had never heard of it; nor are they altogether on this world for they appear in heaven and in hell, in the sun and in the sea. Each character passes before us, and in the last scene appears just as in the first, for there is no development, no growth, no change. The poem is in reality a theological argument in which Bailey advances his views in regard to fate, fore-knowledge and free-will. Nearly all the critics call attention to the idea of necessity which is advanced: "Necessity sits on humanity like to the world of Atlas' neck." As all things work together for good, Lucifer is the friend of God, working out His will. The scene in which the Almighty appears do not in any way differ from many of the others, and are especially noticeable for the tone of easy familiarity with which they are pervaded. So familiar is the tone that it has been said that while other men take off their shoes on holy ground, Bailey puts on two pairs and goes boldly to the throne of grace. But while the poem is argumentative its value is not because of the argument but in spite of it, and of the difficulties which it throws in the way of poetic expression.

Lucifer always sneers when he philosophizes, if such his

thinking can be called, and the high ideals of life which are presented are all in the works of Festus. The highest thought-mark is in the following passage, four lines of which circulate freely in the world of thought:

This life's a mystery,
The value of a single thought cannot be told,
But it is clearly worth a thousand lives
Like many men's. And yet men love to live
As if mere life were worth their living for.
What but perdition will it be to most?
Life's more than spirit and the quick round of blood.
It is a great spirit and a busy heart.
The coward and the small in soul scarce do live.
One generous feeling—one great thought—one deed
Of good ere night, would make life longer seem
Than if each year might number a thousand days,—
Spent as is this by nations of mankind.
We live in deeds, not years; in thoughts, not breaths;
In feelings, not in figures on a dial.
We should count time by heart-throbs. He most lives
Who thinks most—feels the noblest—acts the best.
Life's but a means unto an end—that end,
Beginning, mean, and end of all things—God.

Some of these words can never pass into nothingness, but like those of great writers of the world have in them all the vigor of perpetual youth. What a pity that the author did not place these lines with a few others in a poem which would exist as a whole! But as he did not, we can rejoice that he has given us this noblest man, who reaches his ideal only through incessant thought and toil:

There is a fire-fly in the southern clime
Which shineth only when upon the wing;
So is it with the mind: when once we rest
We darken. On! said God unto the soul,
As to the earth, forever. On it goes
A rejoicing native of the infinite—
As a bird in air—an orb in heaven.

There does not seem to have been very much discretion used in the selection and arrangement of parts, and the sublime and the ridiculous are often painfully blended. His best and worst are often magnified by contrast with the opposite near at hand. Take a single illustration:

She said she wished to die, and so she died ;
 For cloud-like, she poured out her love, which was
 Her life, to freshen this parched heart. It was thus :
 I said we were to part, but she said nothing.
 There was no discord — it was music ceased —
 Life's thrilling, bounding, bursting joy.

In strange contrast with this "music ceased," only a few lines further on we read,

. . . . my heart shook the building of my breast
 Like a live engine booming up and down.

Another passage quoted in which the author has given his views of the relation of the individual to society:

Nature does
 Never wrong: 'tis society which sins.
 Look on the bee upon the wing among flowers:
 How brave, how bright his life! Then mark him hived,
 Cramped, cringing in his self-built, social cell.
 Thus it is in the world-hive: Most where men
 Lie deep in cities as in drifts — death drifts,
 Nosing each other like a flock of sheep.

Not all the figures and comparisons are poor, for here and there is one that is clearly drawn:

Not to the wanderer over southern seas
 Rises the constellation of the Cross
 More lovelily o'er the sky and calm blue wave
 Than does to me that bright one on thy breast.

Bailey mistook size for beauty, as though unmindful of the fact that the gossamer wing of the fly may be as finely proportioned as the wing of an eagle. This unconsciousness of proportion was a characteristic of his youth, and it clung to him in his old age when he gave to the world a new edition of the work with no new beauties added. Fifty years of work had increased the mass fourfold, and most was dross as before. Ben Jonson says, "I deny not but that men who always seek to do more than enough may sometimes happen on something good and great, but very seldom, and when it does come, it does not recompense the other ills." Bailey well illustrates this, not only in the larger matters of style, but also in the use of single words. His vocabulary is in many respects peculiar, and differs from that of

other writers of his day. As a mere word-study it is interesting, for on nearly every page, may be found expressions that appear strange to us. He seems to take delight in words ending in "-ness," and tells us of the "passingness of things," of "sense of lostness," of the "light of perfectness," of a "hurricane of blissfulness." Of odd phrases he had not a few: "Star-sprent curtain," the "embrownment of a lion's eye," "air pranked with fire," "bodies soulical," "galactic light," "nothing nesh," an "eloquential pause," a "gleed like throng," are a few of many that might be quoted. They indicate that the poet tried to avoid the beaten path, and in so doing he made the poem more showy, but not stronger nor more beautiful, and overlooked the weightier matters of sense and true literary proportions. As a result of this, time must do for the poem what the author did, eliminate the parts which are poor and keep but a little for the enjoyment of men.

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